

## **Alabama Medicaid Dental Program celebrates a decade of Success**

Ten years ago Alabama Medicaid knew it had a crisis on its hands with a growing number of children needing dental care and fewer providers participating in Medicaid's dental program. Today, Alabama Medicaid has the 14<sup>th</sup> highest utilization rate of dental services in the U.S.

The success is in the numbers. Since 1998, utilization of dental services has increased from a low of 25.2 to 41.5 percent, or a 62 percent increase. The number of enrolled providers also increased from 430 dentists to 778, and the number of providers treating at least one Medicaid child increased from 350 to 748 providers--48.1 percent.

The turnaround of the dental program began in late 2000, when the Agency was awarded a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for its *Smile Alabama!* Initiative. This multifaceted campaign was designed to improve access to Medicaid children for routine and preventive dental care through education, increased provider support, and improved reimbursement levels.

We sought the grant to make needed improvements," said Medicaid Medical Director Mary G. McIntyre, M.D., M.P.H., "after a dental task force determined the major issues surrounding the dental program and offered solutions to those problems." Among the task force's solutions were increasing dental reimbursement rates, simplifying the prior authorization process, bringing procedure codes in line with current dental practice, and offering education and targeted case management for recipients.

The changes quickly proved successful and the dental program exceeded its goals each grant year. For example, 19 counties had one or no dental providers when the initiative started. Within the first year of the initiative, that number had dropped to 11 counties.

"Although the grant ended, the dental program showed steady improvement in retaining and increasing the number of participating dentists as well as increasing the number of Medicaid patients they treat," said Dr. McIntyre. "We were surprised but very happy when we saw this."

Retired State Dental Director Stuart Lockwood, D.M.D, noted that the increase in providers translated into an increased number of children receiving dental services. "Most significantly, from 1998 to 2007 there has been a 216 percent increase (from 151 to 477) in the number of providers seeing more than 100 patients a year. The number of providers billing for more than \$10,000 per year (from 152 to 571) increased by 275 percent," he said.

Since Medicaid dental rates increased in FY 2001, there has been an 84.3 percent increase in dental utilization, from 103,630 children served that year to 190,968 served in FY 2007. During that same period the number of Medicaid-eligible children rose from 386,000 to 460,526.

There is still room for improvement. "While 190,968 children received at least one dental service in FY 2007, some 270,000 Medicaid eligible children aged 0-20 did not receive a dental visit," said Dr. Lockwood. "The potential exists for more Medicaid dental visits at all ages."

"Most importantly," Dr. Lockwood said, "county-specific data indicates that every county in Alabama has seen significant increases in utilization of Medicaid dental services, from a high of 177.7 percent increase in Baldwin County, to a low of 1.8 percent in Barbour County. Nine counties, including Mobile and Montgomery, recorded increases of over 100 percent.

Overall utilization of Medicaid dental services in Alabama for FY 2007 was 41.5 percent. Among all counties, the range was from a high of 53.5 percent in Cleburne County to a low of 33.6 percent in Marengo County. One county had over 50 percent utilization, 45 counties had 40-49 percent utilization, and 20 counties had 34-39 percent utilization.